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EAST TIMOR

An edited version of the statement by the Catholic Institute for International Relations to the Special Committee of the United Nations on Decolonisation, 15 August 1986.

It is natural in the United Nations that discussion of issues such as East Timor should focus initially on principles — the principle of self-determination, the principle of non-interference in the affairs of other nations and peoples, and the basic principles of human freedom which are enshrined in the UN Charter.

Testimonies from East Timor

As a non-governmental organisation associated with the Catholic Church which works with communities in various countries who are struggling to resolve very fundamental problems of poverty and oppression, CIIR would like to begin at another level. Firstly, here is a priest in East Timor writing at Christmas 1982:

> The people live in an atmosphere of terror, day and night, arbitrary imprisonment, fear, forbidden to speak of certain matters, forbidden to listen to foreign broadcasts, living in a concentration camp style of housing. All of this makes life for the people very difficult. That is the reality today in East Timor.

This second letter, also from a priest, was written in July 1984:

> The greatest suffering now is that the people are confined to their villages, have nothing to eat, are ill-treated, tortured, detained, raped, killed. They are suffering from hunger, but they have no drugs because the authorities will not allow drugs to circulate for fear that some may fall into the hands of the resistance. Illness and hunger are also carrying out their policy of exterminating the population.
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> On 15 May [wrote a priest again, also in 1984] in the town of Laleia, an Indonesian soldier was seen openly kicking a head in the street. It seemed to be a boy's. All the people witnessed this in silence without saying a word or showing any reaction. Fear forces the people to hide their strongest feelings of revulsion.

Finally, here is part of a letter written by an East Timorese in February 1986 to Mgr. da Costa Lopes, who was in charge of East Timor's Catholic Church between 1978 and 1983.

Mgr. Martinho da Costa Lopes, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Dili 1978-1983; Mgr. Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo the present Apostolic Administrator.

> If you go through the villages of Luro, Laivai, Tutuala, Iliomar, Uatolari, Cajularan, Lacluta and so on, you will see that the people live in a state of permanent encirclement. They are not allowed to go more than three kilometres outside their villages. In addition they always have to have a 'pass' issued by the Indonesian military authorities. It happens easily that East Timorese are accused of having contacts with the guerrillas, and then they immediately become victims of torture, massacres, etc. The people live in huts, but at night they are forced to sleep in ditches inside and outside of the hut. The people live in constant fear. The Javanese, however, are also afraid and hide themselves. The militia control the night. In Uatolari the Indonesians set up barbed wire around the centre of the village. At 5 o'clock in the afternoon the whole population has to be in this fenced-off area. This way it is evident that the people continue to be severely hit by hunger. Their gardens and plantations are abandoned. They live like cattle at gunpoint.

These letters, written over a period of several years, present a haunting image of a population deprived of basic freedoms, occupied and unable to manage their own lives, and terrorised by violence. All these extracts present a situation remarkably similar in character: it is one in which the entire society of East Timor — most particularly the rural society in which the vast majority of Timorese live — have been silenced and held in the physical control of the Indonesian armed forces.

The role of the church

These letters were all written by priests or to priests. The Catholic Church is not a political organisation. Because of this, it can sometimes speak with rare authenticity on behalf of the people it serves.

It has not always done so. For much of its history, the Catholic Church in East Timor was a colonial church, perceived by the majority of the people to represent values and forces foreign to their culture. Until very recently, the majority of the population — between 60% and 70% — practised animist religions.

Since 1975, however, a great change has occurred. According to both diocesan and Indonesian government statistics, between 70% and 80% of the population have become Catholics. The last correspondent I quoted explains why they have done so: the church 'has tried to ease the suffering and pain of our people morally and materially,' he wrote. 'The church identified itself with the East Timorese people. That is why the church also suffers with its people.'

It is because the Catholic Church in East Timor is believed to be speaking truthfully about the situation there, and representing the aspirations of East Timor's people, that concern within the Christian churches is now so widespread.

In June 1985 Pope John Paul II told Mgr Filipe Ximenes Belo, who is currently in charge of the diocese, to 'fight the suffering of the people and seek for a right solution for peace in Timor.' 'The Holy See,' he said in 1984, 'continues to follow the situation in East Timor with preoccupation and with the hope that particular consideration will be given in every circumstance to the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the people (. . .) It is the ardent wish of the Holy See that all rights of individuals be respected and that every effort be made to lighten the sufferings of the people by facilitating the work of relief organisations and by ensuring the access of humanitarian aid to those in need.'

The same preoccupations have been echoed by Catholic bishops and bishops' conferences in Indonesia, Portugal, the Netherlands, the United States, Japan, Brazil and other

countries, and by religious congregations and many other Catholic organisations, including Pax Christi, Pax Romana, and European and Asian Justice & Peace groups.

Nor has concern been confined to Catholics. In November 1985 the Portuguese Council of Protestant Churches joined their voice 'to all those around the world who are calling for an immediate end to the present situation in East Timor', and appealed to churches of all denominations throughout the world to 'work to ensure that the people of East Timor may continue to live, and live in freedom.' Concern has been expressed by representatives of the Protestant churches within the Christian Conference of Asia, by Quakers, by Protestant organisations in Europe.

Mr Chairman, such widespread concern and solidarity would not be forthcoming if the conviction did not exist that the church in East Timor is speaking the truth, that its information is supported by evidence and that its conclusions derive not from any partisan political allegiance but from its pastoral experience.

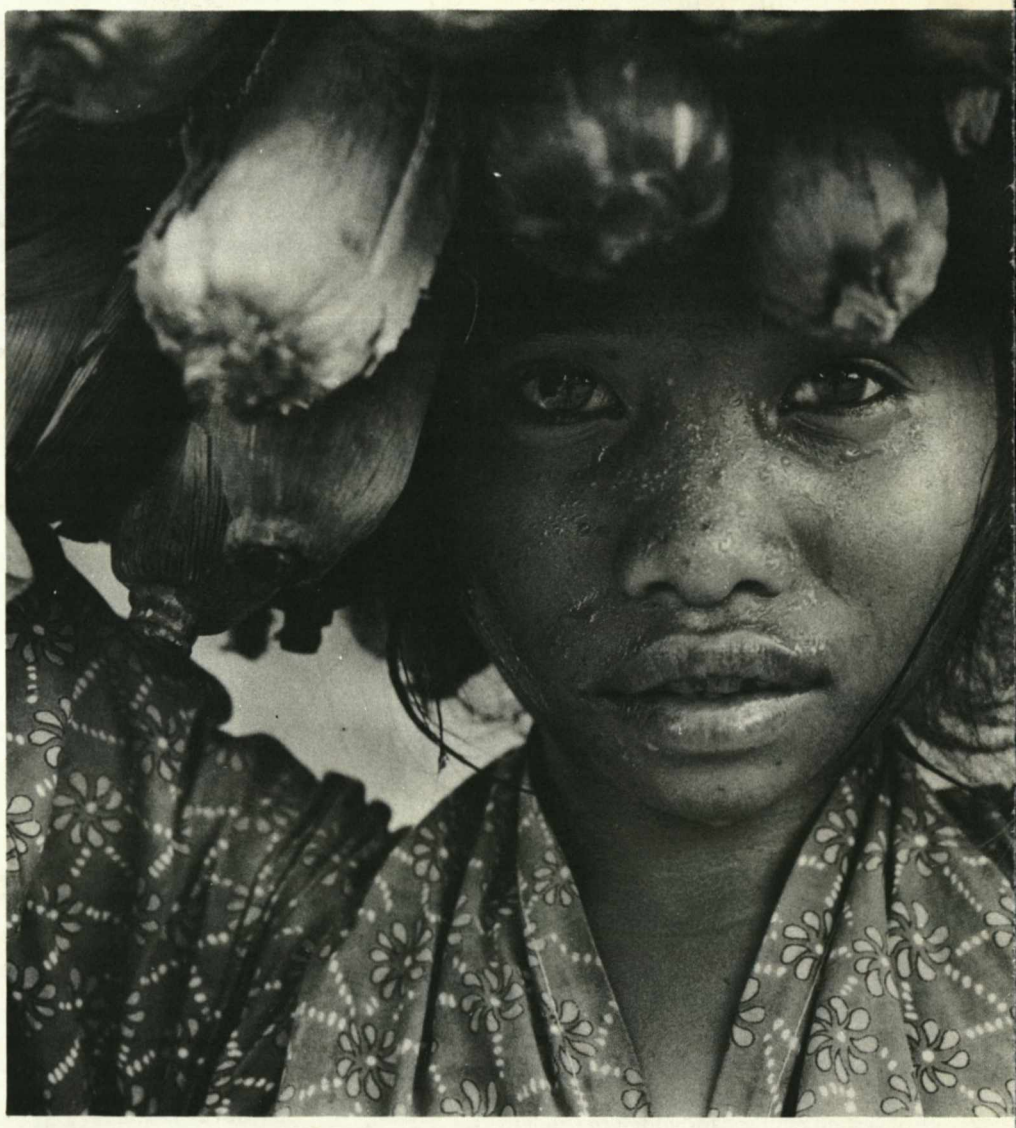
The church's criticisms

What has the Catholic church in East Timor been saying?

Firstly, it has deplored the cruelty of the violence, and the abuses of human rights which have taken place. Mgr Belo and his predecessor, Mgr Martinho de Costa Lopes, have each denounced atrocities against the population and described the hardships suffered by ordinary people since 1975. Most recently, in July 1986, Mgr Belo withdrew church personnel from an Indonesian government training programme after a priest was beaten by soldiers in Lautem, as 'our strongly felt protest against the brutal and inhuman behaviour which continues to occur and which belittles our pastors.'

It has criticised the effects of the Indonesian government's counter-insurgency policies, under which whole communities have been moved from their homes into villages under army surveillance. The countryside has been bombed with artillery and from the air. In one documented case alone, that of the offshore island of Atauro, several thousand people were taken from their villages and held on the island and then moved to other areas, distant from their original communities.

It has drawn attention to abuses in the administration's economic and social policies. The Indonesian government's implementation of its birth control programme was criticised by Mgr Belo in 1984, for example, because officials were going 'through



the villages and little settlements indiscriminately distributing contraceptives (pills, injections and other devices). The agents of the programme do not give any prior information to the population.'

The Catholic Church has warned against too simple an interpretation of the administration's economic development policies. In a pastoral letter written on the occasion of the United Nations' Year of Development, Participation & Peace, Mgr Belo made clear what development means for the church.

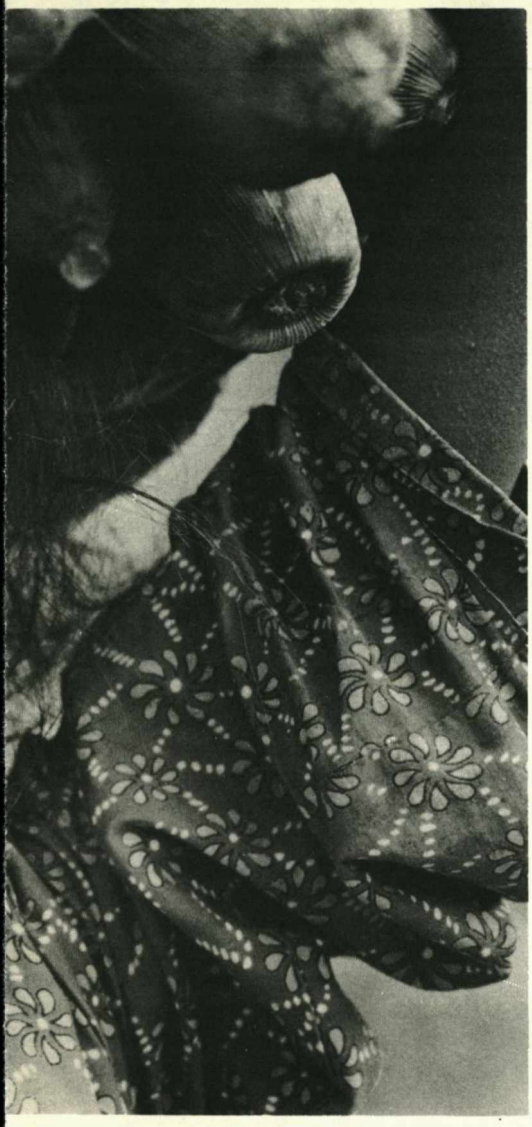
> In the Christian view [he wrote in 1985], development cannot be reduced to simple economic growth . . . To be authentic it must be well-rounded; it must foster the development of each person and of the whole person. Above all, this development must be directed towards human beings.

It is feared that the economic policies currently implemented by the Indonesian government do not benefit the people who depend on the land, who are the poorest and most deprived. They emphasise the production of export crops on plantations whereas production for subsistence has been crippled by war and the effects of the government's counter-insurgency policies. Rather than helped, farming communities have been prevented from working their land, or have been relocated without free choice to new areas. It is also well known that the export companies operating in East Timor pay very low prices to small farmers, though the profits from coffee and other crops have been substantial. Most of the export companies are owned by Indonesian interests, particularly interests associated with the Indonesian army.

Finally, the church has criticised the erosion of Timorese culture and identity as the result of attempts to Indonesianise East Timor, by promoting the values of *pancasila* in schools and in the media, without consideration or proper respect for the language and way of life of the society.

Ten years of oppression

In short, fear and mistrust have come to govern the lives of the population, who for ten years have been virtually isolated from the world and, within Timor itself, have been unable to travel



at will, or engage in normal economic activity, trust one another or speak freely. Individuals suspected of sympathising with those who continue to resist Indonesia's rule have been punished by death and torture as well as arrest and detention. The Indonesian period of government has been characterised by substantial and widespread violations of human rights, including torture, imprisonment without trial, disappearances and extra-judicial killings.

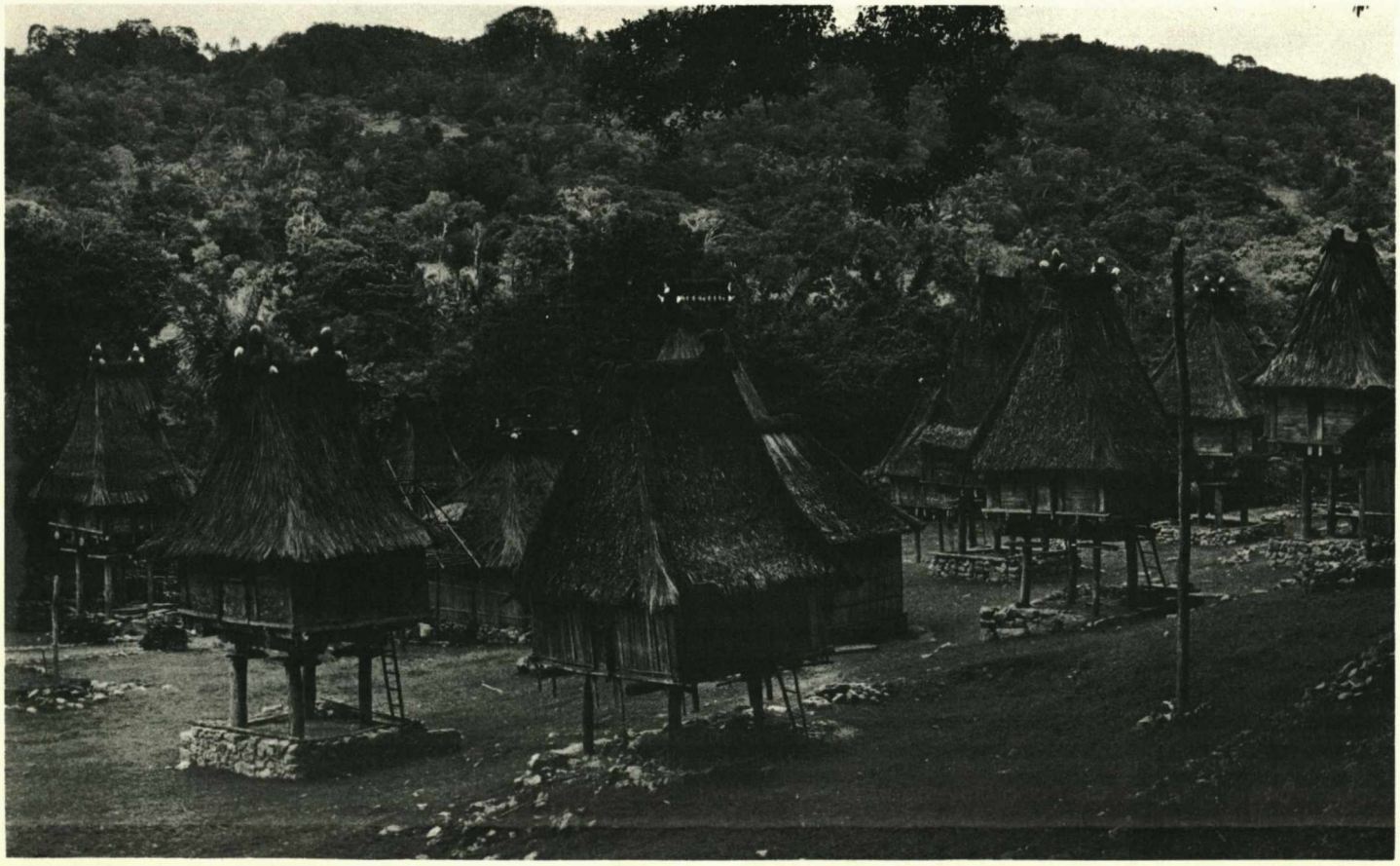
The isolation of East Timor

Organisations like CIIR are sometimes condemned for criticising the Indonesian government's record when we have not visited the territory. We wholly agree that this is unsatisfactory and it is not our usual practice. It is not a problem of our own making, however. In 1982 CIIR welcomed an invitation from the Indonesian Embassy in London to visit East Timor. In view of the sensitivity of the issues, and the need to provide objective information, we invited a number of academic and technical specialists to accompany us, and asked to visit one year later in July 1983. We asked to go with us a lecturer in international law from the School of Oriental & African Studies in London, a pediatrician employed by the London School of Tropical Medicine, an agronomist, a development agency representative fluent in *bahasa indonesia*, and an academic able to speak two local languages and Portuguese. Yet, though we gave one year's notice, we were eventually obliged to cancel shortly beforehand because the Indonesian authorities were unable to confirm their own invitation.

More than ten years after Indonesia invaded East Timor, the issues facing the international community are surely clear. The occupation itself is acknowledged to have contravened the principles of international conduct and the UN Charter. There are differences of view about the scale of human rights abuses or about particular incidents, but there is no dispute that numerous and serious violations have taken place throughout the period since 1975. All parties acknowledge that resistance and opposition to Indonesia's rule continue.

Principle and practice

A consensus exists on these matters. Yet political support for self-determination and for returning the territory to the pre-1975 position has steadily declined — as successive votes in the General Assembly demonstrate. There is a visible gap between the international principles of diplomacy and its practice. The international community is in a position to shelve the matter of East Timor — a small territory, from which the Indonesian



government cannot easily be dislodged — or confront the issues it raises and seek to resolve them justly, in accordance with international law.

It is here that the attitudes of East Timor's people become very important. It may still be assumed by many that, with time, they will accustom themselves to Indonesian rule and grow to accept it. Such an assumption may be quite false.

During the years CIIR has worked on this question, we have met a number of East Timorese and clergy working in the territory. These people have held different political views. Some would agree that in 1975 they did not oppose Indonesia. Not one, from those we have met, has denied that today the very great majority of East Timorese — including many of those who were originally sympathetic to integration with Indonesia — have been alienated by the Indonesian government's exercise of power. All accepted that opposition to Indonesian rule is now deeper and stronger than it was before — though its expression is, of course, greatly limited by the restrictions on freedom of speech and movement which continue to be imposed by the Indonesian government.

Those we have talked to do *not* agree about the form of régime they would like to see replacing the present one. They differ about what form of government East Timor's people would choose if they were consulted. They are unanimous only in their conviction that the invasion of 1975 was deeply resented, that its effects have traumatised the society and that Indonesia's presence today is even less acceptable to the people than it was in 1975 — even if it has to be accepted, because of force.

We have been particularly struck by the frequency with which people to whom we have spoken have declared that resistance and opposition will continue indefinitely, and that the cycle of repression and alienation, followed by resistance and further repression, may in practice become virtually irreversible.

It is this conviction which explains why the Catholic Church in East Timor has emphasised the importance of consulting representatives of the people and why Mgr Belo wrote, as he did in 1984, that

> The only solution to the East Timor conflict is a political and diplomatic one, and this solution should include, above all, the respect for the right of a people for self-determination (. . .) As long as this is not implemented, there will not be a peaceful solution for East Timor.

If this is right, the international community must ask itself whether it is prepared to accept such a situation, which is the forseeable consequence if governments take the less contentious diplomatic option and accept an unjust and violent *fait accompli* rather than support the principles of the United Nations Charter, however uncomfortable these may be. This is the International Year of Peace. The initiative of the Secretary General with regard to East Timor offers an appropriate, possibly unique, opportunity for governments to show their commitment to the concept of international community which is represented by the United Nations, and so further the cause of peace.

But let it be a just peace — involving the support of all parties, specifically the people of East Timor who are the most directly concerned. In the words adopted by the Catholic bishops of Indonesia in 1983, when they wrote to express their sympathy to the Catholic Church in East Timor,

> Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of a balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called an enterprise of justice.

Photographs: Elaine Brière

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